

These Poems
For the Dog's Dying

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to M, for ourselves

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Cuillin between Winter and Spring

now between winter and spring
unwilling to recede and unable to flourish
heavy rain seeks to wash away his world
the budding things express themselves
with cruelty, their green blades
incise away his clear memory

here he was so sick; here he crouched in his weakness
to release his illness in sorry black pats on the snow
here he wanted to sleep away his final days far from us

weather only cool
gone now these four weeks the snow
where he lay for his suffering and dying
the snow his lover each year
he lay in the vile sun
on the last hummock of glacial white
the brown and black spattered white of his body
protecting the black fringed snow

but in this April he could only lie
where he stumbled and fell, look back at us
embarrassed, settle his jaw
where lymph nodes pulsated and broke his breathing
against the iron ice along the fence

the snow melted anyway around his dying

we raised him; we couldn't pray
we turned him, made him refuse food and water

finally we yielded him to his death deliberately
before the green things could laugh in their resurrection
and the old snow die wholly away

What I Wouldn't Give

an absence one becomes aware of again: the heart
evacuates

because he has come to stare at me in my chair
where I read

whatever I hold in my hand with such attentive
neglect

every morning while the walk time grows later
and the leash

risks being forgotten for all time, as now upon
his death

I no longer need
to place the harness over his shoulders and under his forelegs

with a sweet
snap to confirm he is in my arms and my dog

and I will sally out the door again with jaunty leap
from vestibule

to porch
while he snuffs the air and I button up my cuffs

and in his white glistening
neck fur

the sharp fresh wind of morning is warm and sweet
to touch again

the dog neither dead nor living; he has come again
to me by the ghost

and asked of me what I cannot give, never again now
to the joy of his body

Cuillin

Balto you were called when we found you
and it half-fit you—cartoon snow dog
all legs and looks, goofy
beauty and muscle and foolish tongue
had had no training and who knew
how much love or brutalizing
by three different owners in your puppy year

in meeting my eyes that first day
the blue ice of your pupils
soulful and unyielding
stared back at me unflinching
an affront to canine etiquette
but as we gazed at one another
in some instinct of maleness
we were judging the lack
each had carried to that moment
that we would break down into love

the leash your first nemesis:
with the choke-chain we yanked at each other
until the white young fur warming your neck
through that first winter had been chafed away;
we weren't yet *working together*
husky and man

now death has released you from the leash of my love
and lets you take the street with the same freedom
as on that first climb of Mount Royal I released you
in the woods and watched you disappear
for five minutes
my breath perfectly still
until you lifted your head over the ridge to my left
and stared me down, the message clear
aren't you coming with me?

for a year or more we couldn't stroke your tail
you'd swing around hard, put gentle teeth
to the offending hand;
but later in the crook of one embracing arm
I could brush you snout to tail tip
and throat to groin
teasing out your grey winter undercoat
with a red rake you hated and came back

and stood still for—
when you learned at last that human love
like dog's might be trusted in rough play
and obedience be mastery, mastery obedience
within the pack's cool white perimeter

you became our familiar
by shedding mistress blood with a bite
you meant for a braying stupid beagle
under the street lamp on the corner;
when she held you back from young murder
with a leash yank and thigh shove
your teeth sank anywhere they could—
two red streams from her calf to ankle

in your badness you flinched from my growling eyes
waited in your shame for the gavel
to slam down once more on your case and the front door
to close on your hind legs and bum and only
the dark street to leash and feed you from then on;
but you found yourself sleeping in your home
that night, and thereafter forgiven, impossibly, loved—
from that night on a different animal—
that was your final rescue

and always binding us the exchange of food
table scraps and broccoli stems
you took so politely from my hand
between the same tight teeth
with which you shook nine squirrels to death
in the garden, the visceral lightning
of your muscle work, the scream
of the caught beast lasting less than a second
before that instinctive shaking of your head
the dead paws slapping your white cheeks
and when you heard in my outcry
my pride and horror
you put the limp thing down in my honour
expecting me to feed
your eyes exceptional with trust
and the pathetic biscuit I gave you to stand aside
as I bagged and heaved it
was entirely satisfactory to you, time after time
so, *working together*

Zoi who brought you to us
guardian angel of all animals in need and fear
was a true sorceress after all
not only in her teas of weed and Nepalese herbs
not only in the belief in her own dreams
but in her knowing the instant
she saw your baby blue eyes
that you were our future, we yours
though Zoi would survive in neither

we obeyed her, the three of us
we brought you home on a leash
we renamed you for our pleasure
and you came to your new name
soon you knew you lived here
and sprinted up the stairs at walk's end gleeful
to bed down in your home
you became the genius of our home
miraculous dog
you became Cuillin

As a Lesser Being

the pain is molecular
I gave Cuillin my soul
he shook it in his teeth
at every point of puncture
adoration and agony

his reincarnation is in me
I am his living death
and his newborn

Cuillin in His Element

the garden under winter: the joy of atavism
mixing DNA and desire: the ghost of an ancestor
husky pulls in the starry night to the frozen scent
of caribou, and Cuillin follows, straining at the harness
between past and present, the white moon and daylight
as he turns his circles and eights into and out of
the trees, the trellis, the shrubs and the muscular drifts—
clawing traces first and then obedient to the Arctic
he has made of his garden, Cuillin the writhing happy
soul in cold cleanness, his black nose
snow-ploughing at last in glee to stop him—
when only a roll on his shoulders from side to side
and a standing shake to bring him back to the master's world
can slow him down and tell us who his real lord is

Cuillin Sanctifies the Garden

that it is now empty
that I have no helpmate
that I have no playmate
that his bed places of snow steam in the sunlight
that his youth was spent here
in the absolute perfection of muscle and nose
that it is only his, and now has no owner
and cannot be owned
that Spring is an injustice done to his body
that Spring is still beautiful
though he is not here to run through flowerbeds
not here to piss on tender euonymus
not here to lie asleep on the porch over
his kingdom, eyes closed
paws dangling from the edge
and his black nose twitching while he snores
that I tend the garden now
in his memory, to grow it again
each year as he would know it
in the undeniable hope that it will again invite him
to sigh into the cool shadows
under the arcaded branches of the forsythia
and embed himself once more into this place
so we may refute his martyrdom
laid deep in the greenery of his life

We Have Gathered

the wind is chill; it's barely April
twilight is losing its grey blood
to darkness; the porch light snaps on
above these five, where they kneel or sit
their heads graced with aureoles

they are on the house's rear porch
eight nailed steps above the yard
where the last snow (his great love)
has soured away into dirt-laced patches
and the iron-hard bareness of the trees
whistles as if for a dog

two women in the background are Romans
the elder squatting, her associate kneeling
astonished and raising two hands
gently over his four limbs, while the elder of the two
in shadow, extends the second needle into lamplight

he lies, inert, and not yet dead
asleep and there will be no waking
his maculate white beauty
still, his forelegs extended, the patches
of grey and brown that littered him over
rising and falling to the labour that is now
his cancerous breathing

to the right, his mother and mistress
seated stiffly for the suffering of her spine
extends a dismal hand
into the light and down
to caress his ears, barely reaching
for he cannot rise to her pity and she cannot bend to his dying

at front left, his daily attendant
standing, knees bent in sorrow
and hands wringing, his short cropped hair
most luminous of the bowed heads
his lips open in some parting outcry
of faith and sorrow

the assistant's tears
show her own suffering; the mother and mistress
holds in her weeping; the veteran soldier

is dry-eyed, she knows her business
is also love

the fifth, in the foreground
lone man at the death
kneels, with his back turned; his grizzled head
scarcely takes grace-light from the lamp
but has been flung up instead to one side
so that his silhouetted profile and the wildness
of one damp eye and the sharp inhale
we read in his collapsing shoulders
convey disbelief and woe

the perspective reveals only
in intervals of fallen white
within the circle of the gathered five
the dying saint
the needle will not descend
the vein not open
the lungs not release their final breath
and the heart not cease its long struggle

against the cold night and the hard cedar
of the porch they laid him upon his cherished bed
for the putting him to sleep
but the blue eyes are already so deeply closed
there will be no resurrection painted
beyond this moment, this loving crucifixion
this sudden descent from the cross
and deposition of the dead dog

And on the next day

Came down the red flowerets of ancient maples
encased in globules of clear ice
Came down the middling branches, the adolescent
branches, healthy and white-wooded at the tear
Came down the whole crowned power of utmost trees
snapped across their two- and three foot girth
under the frozen weight of chain-mail

Cuillin died a day, then the ice rain fell for a day,
and the trees were torn for a day, under that insult
of glass, that perfect casting of each tree brittle and shining
as if for preservation

Came down on the place of his death a dozen branches
from the ancient maple under which he lived out his life in the garden
landed where he should have been sleeping, vibrating
the whole house with the gravity of their fall,
branches that would have maimed or killed him, but that
he was already gone

why the next day should a small apocalypse
maim his garden? The skies wept ice
and his world shattered like glass at the highest note of the female voice
Nature turned over groaning at the tear in its fabric
that his death had opened and his death had closed

Emptiness

I

In the days after his death
April blew through quick and cruel
the last snow (his love) melted
and the bare branches that cried out
in their nakedness at his passing
put forward their fractal lies
of green and copper; the first spring
of his afterlife dared to fulfil
its forecast. The dog was forgotten
as the squirrels and cats ran rampant
over his death's terrain

II

To make a place sacred you need only
great love, then great loss
a deep embodiment of the lost one
in the earth and contours, the winds and roses
of that place; spilled blood
or urine, cruelly or joyously—
and the death scene, ornate or mindless
to complete the garden as a place of prayer

Dog's Body

mere description

I

as your ears flattened rearward
as your eyes widened and stared in challenge
as your toes flexed and opened in pleasure
as you shook yourself to relax us all
as you walked with your mouth open or closed
at ease or on alert
white fox's tail slack or taut
we learned to know your mind

II

learned the God-kissed
stride of the northern dog
viewed from behind
whether tail up in a gooseneck curve
and the pert asshole visible
or down in the waterfall of fox fur
white and bushy
the hips and bum so lean
the thighs so tight in canter
not one calorie of body heat wasted
as you mushed me forward
through January drifts to the knee

III

paws indifferent to minus twenty five
on the morning walk
re-entered the house and were at once
so warm I gripped them in my palms
to comfort my useless hands

at the far end of my inhaling embrace
as I towelled you down
the faint pleasure of tar
cleanness of the saint
incorruptibility of his glistening hair
fine spikes of strong white
sprayed from neck to shoulders

IV

the thickness of that ruff
around your throat and neck
like a woven scarf of Shetland wool
that fingers might plunge into endlessly
and brushing never thin
the shock of warmth you were born to carry with you

in summer still
as you lay in your sunbath
with the heat descending in welters around you
those same white hairs filtered
radiant viciousness from the sun's high temper
and kept you Arctic and snoring
miraculously cool

V

black-backed ear
white-backed ear with black fringe
white eyelashes one eye
black eyelashes the other
grey paw pads
pink paw pads
four white paws
brown hair and fur for a saddle over your back
black mascara
the black of your right temple
with a white cross
black blotch on your rump
to anchor your white tail
grey dapple of appaloosa
at your left haunch
and your thigh from there down
pushing pure white

so much that was maculate
emblazoned your whiteness

VI

that you trusted us with your paws
the most tender and private moments of your body
when you half slept we might stroke them

when we dried you from rain we might close them
in a towel and spread the toes for cleaning
when you slept you extended your legs
in a stretch of utter trust
and where all four paws coincided in an instant
of sleep and surrender we would film them
in those years when the absence of your body from a photo
made no difference

VII

soon we will have these relics back from the fire
and will bury them beneath
the crabapple when it blossoms in spring
so the pink petals can rain down on the ashes of your pink tongue
and your sainthood be perfected

That There Is No False Spring

the bright evening sunlight lances the grass
greener than this morning by the *te* of the rain

a blessing once given
does not end with the life of the saint

your solemn eyes are deeply closed
your black nose moistens every blade